

Axcell saves No. 1 Eagles at national tourney

Written by Jim Ecker

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HARRISON, Ark. - Megan Axcell hit the biggest 3-pointer of her life Thursday night to rescue the Kirkwood Eagles at the NJCAA Division II national tournament.

Axcell swished a 3-pointer from the corner with 34 seconds left to erase a 63-62 deficit and help the top-ranked Eagles nip Cincinnati State, 65-63, in the quarterfinals at Pioneer Pavilion.

Kirkwood trailed by eight points, 61-53, with less than four minutes left before mounting a furious comeback to keep their hopes alive of winning the national title.

Kirkwood (35-0) will face fourth-ranked Kankakee (30-2) in the semifinals Friday at 8 p.m. Johnson County will meet Monroe Community College in the first semifinal at 6 p.m., with the championship game slated for Saturday night.

The Eagles committed a whopping 26 turnovers and missed 11 free throws Thursday, putting their season in serious jeopardy, but they pulled things together by outscoring Cincinnati 12-2 down the stretch.

Deleyah Harris scored to pull Kirkwood within 61-55 to begin the comeback. Simone Goods forced a jump ball that went in Kirkwood's favor, then she scored to make it 61-57.

Cincinnati missed a shot and Tay Tay Wilson fed Harris with a long pass for a layup that pulled the Eagles within 61-59.

Wilson stole the ball and drove for a layup, tying the game at 61-61 with 1:48 remaining.

Ashley Moore, who tormented the Eagles with 21 points, missed a shot for Cincinnati State and

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Axcell grabbed the defensive rebound. Goods was fouled with 1:14 left and made one free throw, giving Kirkwood a 62-61 lead and finishing a 9-0 run.

Nora Minter scored to give Cincinnati State a 63-62 lead with 53 seconds left to play.

The Eagles fed Goods near the basket, but the 6-foot-2 center was covered and fed Axcell in the corner. Axcell was open and popped in her crucial 3-pointer for her only points of the game.

The game was far from over at that point.

Takyr Gilbert missed a 3-pointer for Cincinnati State and Goods grabbed the rebound. Wilson was trapped in the backcourt, but Kirkwood called a timeout with 10.9 seconds left to avoid a potential turnover.

It was still far from over.

Shaneequah Watkins was assigned the task of throwing the ball in-bounds for Kirkwood following the timeout, but she could not find an open teammate and was called for a five-second violation.

Cincinnati State called a timeout, still with 10.9 seconds showing on the clock.

Moore drove to the basket for Cincinnati, but Goods blocked the ball out-of-bounds with 4.8 seconds left. The officials ruled the ball went out-of-bounds off of Moore, but they checked the replay and correctly gave the ball to Cincinnati State under their own basket.

Cincinnati's in-bounds pass was alertly deflected by Harris and rolled away from the basket. Jacie Dickerson gathered the ball for Cincinnati about 15 feet from the basket, but was pestered

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by Wilson.

Dickerson launched a shot that missed badly with about three seconds remaining. Watkins and Wilson battled for the defensive rebound and loose ball, and the final horn sounded before anything else could happen.

Kirkwood got off to a quick 8-0 start, but Goods picked up two fouls in the first quarter and sat on the bench for the entire second quarter. The game was tied at halftime, 28-28.

Moore starred for Cincinnati State (27-7) in the second half and appeared to be steering her club to an upset victory before the Eagles responded in the final minutes in their biggest scare of the campaign.

Harris led Kirkwood with 15 points. Goods finished with 13 points. TiRayah Cotton gave the Eagles a spark off the bench with 12 points.

CINCINNATI STATE (63): Dickerson 4 2-3 10, Gilbert 3 1-1 8, Harfield 1 0-0 3, Baird 1 0-0 3, Minter 2 0-0 4, Coulter 2 0-0 4, Whitlock 2 0-0 4, Moore 7 3-6 21, Thomas 0 0-0 0, Anderson 0 0-2 0, Gary 3 0-0 6. Totals 25 6-12 63.

KIRKWOOD (65): Goods 5 3-4 13, Harris 7 1-2 15, T.Wilson 3 2-4 8, Watkins 2 4-8 8, Usher 0 0-2 0, Puok 1 0-0 2, Axcell 1 0-0 3, Taylor 1 0-0 2, Voss 0 2-2 2, Cotton 4 3-4 12. Totals 25 15-26 65.

Halftime - Kirkwood 28, Cincinnati State 28. 3-point goals - Cincinnati State 7 (Moore 4, Gilbert 1, Harfield 1, Baird 1), Kirkwood 2 (Axcell 1, Cotton 1).